

## What do kids know? A response to Karin Murris

Hand, Michael

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# What do kids know? A response to Karin Murris

*ABSTRACT: Building on Miranda Fricker's work on epistemic injustice, Karin Murris has recently argued that children in school characteristically receive a credibility deficit based on a disparaging stereotype of children, and charged teachers with eschewing such stereotypes and committing to epistemic equality. I raise some objections to Murris's argument.*

In her influential book *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Fricker, 2007), Miranda Fricker identifies several ways in which people can be treated unjustly specifically in their capacity as knowers. She pays particular attention to a group of epistemic injustices she terms 'testimonial injustices'; and she takes the central case of testimonial injustice to be what she calls 'identity-prejudicial credibility deficit'.

A speaker receives an identity-prejudicial credibility deficit when what she says is taken less seriously than it ought to be because of a prejudice on the part of the hearer about a social group to which the speaker belongs. In the cinematic example with which Fricker begins her book, Marge Sherwood's expressed suspicion of the murderer Tom Ripley is dismissed by Herbert Greenleaf with the words: 'Marge, there's female intuition, and then there are facts'. Here it is Herbert's prejudice against women that leads him to give Marge less credibility than she deserves. This is the first of many powerful examples in the book, both fictional and non-fictional, of speakers whose views are discounted or underrated by hearers because of their sex or race.

Fricker argues, depressingly but plausibly, that 'testimonial injustice is a normal part of discursive life' and that its ubiquity is attributable in part to the fact that those who perpetrate it need not hold prejudiced beliefs. We habitually undervalue the testimony of members of certain social groups because of 'stereotypical images held in the collective social imagination', which images 'operate beneath the radar of our ordinary doxastic self-scrutiny, sometimes even despite beliefs to the contrary' (pp.39-40). So it would be surprising if testimonial injustice were not also a feature of life in schools. And, of course, there is no shortage of empirical evidence suggesting that teachers, often quite unwittingly, pay more attention to, or give greater weight to, or more frequently invite, classroom contributions from boys than from girls, or from white pupils than black ones.

Here I should like to consider the suggestion that, in addition to the familiar identity prejudices with which Fricker is predominantly concerned in her book, there is another identity prejudice that makes testimonial injustice endemic to the institution of schooling as we know it, and which therefore ought to be of particular concern to educational theorists. This is a suggestion recently made by Karin Murris in her article 'The epistemic challenge of hearing child's voice' (Murris, 2013). Murris contends that children in school characteristically receive a credibility deficit simply because they are children, because of a disparaging stereotypical image of children held in the collective social imagination. She writes:

In examples from practice I offer below, teachers do not believe a child, *because* it is

a *child* who is speaking, with typical responses such as: s/he is not telling the truth, or is immature, or at the other (sentimental) end of the scale: endearment: smiling, laughing, or expressions such as 'oh, how sweet'. Credibility deficit is related to age, in that being a particular age has significant impact on how much credibility a hearer affords a speaker, and when and how s/he is silenced systematically. (p.248)

To support her diagnosis, Murriss offers an extract from a video-recorded dialogue between a group of pupils in a UK middle school, in the course of which one child proposes that 'a perfect world' in which people are 'always being nice to each other' and 'go round saying 'hiya' drinking cups of coffee all the time', is a world that 'wouldn't be comfortable at all' (p.250). Murriss comments:

[the video-recording] invariably prompts adult laughter. A child's dislodging of the idea that peace is desirable and the probing thinking out loud does not seem to touch teachers' belief that peace is a goal towards which we should naturally strive. What they say (the content) is not heard—epistemic equality is absent. (p.251)

Murriss goes on to espouse an ideal of classroom dialogue in which both adults and children 'give their mind to what there is to think about, which is only possible when adults are open-minded, have epistemic modesty, epistemic trust and are committed to epistemic equality' (p.258).

As far as I know, Murriss is the first to express this sort of worry about the epistemic position of children in schools specifically in terms of testimonial injustice and identity-prejudicial credibility deficit. But the worry itself will be familiar to anyone acquainted with the child-centred tradition of educational thought. Anxiety about the epistemic hierarchy implied by the teacher-pupil relationship is a key motivator of the rejection of transmission models of teaching and learning, scepticism about school curricula, and the emphasis on children as constructors or co-constructors of their own knowledge.

What are we to make of Murriss's thesis? I think we can dispatch quite quickly her apparent conflation of epistemic justice with epistemic equality. As Fricker is at pains to point out, credibility is not the sort of thing we should be trying to share out equally:

... credibility is not a good that belongs with the distributive model of justice. Unlike those goods that are fruitfully dealt with along distributive lines (such as wealth or health care), there is no puzzle about the fair distribution of credibility, for credibility is a concept that wears its proper distribution on its sleeve. Epistemological nuance aside, the hearer's obligation is obvious: she must match the level of credibility she attributes to her interlocutor to the evidence that he is offering the truth. (Fricker, 2007, p.19)

Credibility should be allocated according to the available evidence that the speaker is a reliable source of information on the topic in question. It makes no sense to give equal credence to the medical diagnoses of our GPs and our grandmothers (unless our grandmothers happen to be medically qualified). And it would be silly to give equal weight to the considered views of history teachers and their Year 8 pupils on the causes of the First World War.

Still, if epistemic equality is the wrong ideal, it hardly follows that children qua children receive no identity-prejudicial credibility deficit. Murriss's suggestion is that there is, in our collective social imagination, a disparaging stereotypical image of children as immature, ill-informed and endearing; and that we see evidence of this in the fact that teachers are typically both amused and undisturbed by the child's thought that a world of friendly coffee-drinkers might not be a comfortable one. I think Murriss is partly right. It is surely true that we tend to think of children in roughly this way, and that this influences how seriously we take their thoughts on ethical questions. Few of us will find our estimation of the value of peace troubled by the child's worry about a surfeit of niceness – in a way that it might, perhaps, be troubled by Martin Luther's call for 'peace if possible, truth at all costs'. However I do not share Murriss's anxiety about the teachers' laughter, which strikes me as an apt response to the characterisation of peaceful citizens as high-fiving coffee-swiggers. More importantly, I'm persuaded neither that the stereotype of children is a disparaging one, nor that the child in the video receives a credibility deficit if her remarks about peace fail to disturb the ethical commitments of her hearers. The fact is that younger children typically *are* immature, ill-informed and endearing, and it would, frankly, be alarming if an adult's belief that peace is worth striving for were to be shaken by a ten-year-old's reservations about niceness. A plausible reply to Murriss, then, is that the stereotype is accurate and the credibility assigned to the speaker appropriate.

Perhaps it will be objected that stereotyping is problematic per se, because stereotypes by definition are generalisations to which not every member of the population in question will conform. Maybe we should say that teachers ought not to be relying on stereotypes of children at all. As Fricker is at pains to explain, however, stereotyping is an indispensable part of our ordinary epistemic practice. She writes:

We are picturing hearers as confronted with the immediate task of gauging how likely it is that what a speaker has said is true. Barring a wealth of personal knowledge of the speaker as an individual, such a judgement of credibility must reflect some kind of social generalization about the epistemic trustworthiness—the competence and sincerity—of people of the speaker's social type, so that it is inevitable (and desirable) that the hearer should spontaneously avail himself of the relevant generalizations in the shorthand form of (reliable) stereotypes. Without such a heuristic aid he will not be able to achieve the normal spontaneity of credibility judgement that is characteristic of everyday testimonial exchange. (Fricker, 2007, p.32)

Until we get to know people as individuals, we have no choice but to make provisional assessments of their epistemic competence and sincerity based on what we know about people of their type. If we know of someone only that she is licensed to practise in some professional sphere, we set greater store by her advice in that sphere than by the advice of people not so licensed. And if we know of someone only that she is a child, we give less weight to her judgments on a broad range of practical and theoretical matters than to the judgments of adults. In both cases, of course, our reasonable expectations may be confounded: some professionals are incompetent and some children wise beyond their years. But, as a rule, stereotyping serves us much better in the epistemic economy than withholding credibility judgments until we know our interlocutors well.

Epistemic justice for children qua children, then, requires neither that we subscribe to a principle of epistemic equality, nor that we eschew stereotypes of children. Its requirements, I think, are these. First, we must ensure that the stereotypes of children we use as the basis of our provisional credibility judgments are as accurate as we can make them. Later in her article, Murrin notes the existence of another stereotype of children as 'wild, uncontrollable and possibly dangerous': if such an image exists in the collective social imagination, it is plainly one with which educators should have no truck. And second, we must be ready to abandon our stereotypes as soon as we know individual children well enough to do without them. Teachers need not normally re-examine their ethical commitments when a pupil remarks that peace is not all it's cracked up to be; but things may be different when their previous dealings with the pupil have shown her to be a Socrates in the making.

## References

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